

Field Report

Oregon Trail Interpretive Center

■ 1.0 Summary

The concept of what is now the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center began in 1987 as an economic development project by community leaders in Baker City, Oregon. With the help of the BLM, a local non-profit corporation (now the Oregon Trail Preservation Trust) refined the concept of a major visitor facility to interpret the Oregon Trail at Flagstaff Hill (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Visitor Facility



With funding secured, the BLM assumed the lead to build, staff, and manage the Interpretive Center project. The environmental assessment was completed in 1988. A neighboring landowner donated an easement needed for a key overlook on the footpath system, and a critical agreement was negotiated which protects the site from the impacts of mining.

Prior to the groundbreaking in May 1991, the Oregon Department of Transportation improved Highway 86 from Baker City to the site. The grand opening occurred during Memorial Day weekend of 1992. Of the approximately \$10 million cost of the planning, design, and construction of the Center, \$1.1 million came from state and local governments, private corporations, individuals, and foundations.

There are currently no ongoing Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) applications. During special event weekends, a shuttle bus (van) system is operated from the entrance overflow parking area to the main building. Potential ATS needs have been identified for this site as follows:

- Within the site there are approximately three miles of trails providing access to various interpretive areas. Currently, a pedestrian round trip along the trails is estimated to take approximately two hours. No comfort facilities or water are provided along the trail. Traversing the grades and the time required to complete a round trip may limit access to some sectors of the population (those in poor health or with ambulatory restrictions). Providing a tram along the trail may be an option to better serve the visitor population.
- The site at Flagstaff Hill is located approximately five miles outside Baker City. The access route has recently been improved by the Oregon DOT. An additional ATS concept may be to add a bike lane along the route. The primary access route out of the city (State Route 86) connects to a planned expansion of the city's bike route system at the Powder River.

■ 2.0 Background Information

2.1 Location

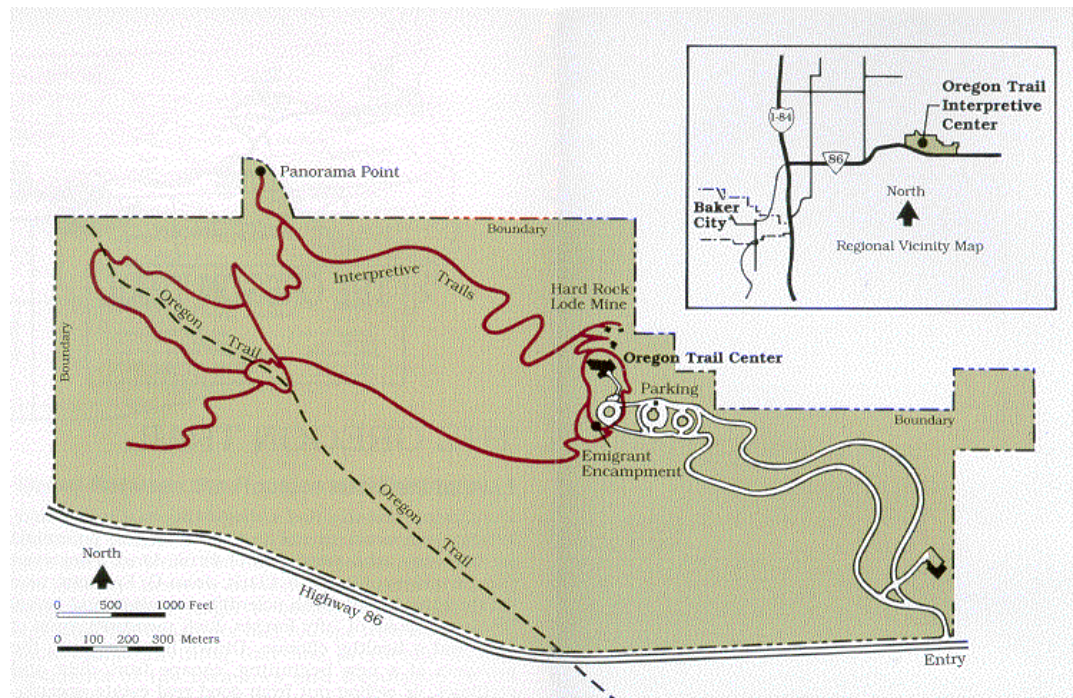
Situated atop Flagstaff Hill, the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center overlooks the fertile lands in Baker County. The Interpretive center is located five miles east of Baker City, Oregon on Highway 86.

2.2 Administration and Classification

The Oregon Trail Interpretive Center at Baker City, Oregon is managed by the Department of Interior's BLM. The supervisor for the Oregon trail Interpretive Center is David Hunsaker.

2.3 Physical Description

The focal point of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center is the visitor's building, where the story of the settlers traveling the Oregon Trail can be relived. The story is illustrated via life-size interpretive displays and a view over Baker Valley that has changed little since the settlers first set eyes on it. In addition to the visitor's building, there are approximately three miles of interpretive trails that lead to overlooks, wagon encampments, and actual remnants of wagon ruts along the Oregon Trail (see Figure 2). Staff is currently in the process of creating a replica of a gold mine.

Figure 2. Site Location and Layout

2.4 Mission and Goals of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center

It is the mission of the BLM to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

Congress recognized the value of remaining public lands by declaring that these lands would remain in public ownership. Congress also directed BLM to employ “multiple use” management, defined as “management of the public lands and their various resource values so that they are utilized in the combination that will best meet the present and future needs of the American people.”

It is the goal of the BLM in Baker County to balance the needs of commercial and recreational users in the area with the preservation interpretation of history. The Oregon Trail Interpretive Center was built to preserve the heritage of the thousands of people traveling the Oregon Trail in the 1800s and to educate the public about the pioneering spirit of yesterday.

Staff from the interpretive center state their mission is education of the public and stewardship and enhancement of the resource.

While the facility was built to document the historical travels from the east, the interpretive center at Flagstaff Hill was proposed as an economic development tool for Baker City. As the local wood products industry has declined, local officials have been broadening the local economic base to include recreational activities.

2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

The Oregon Trail Interpretive Center has a design capacity of 200,000 people/year. Since its opening in 1992, visitation at the center has shown a mixed pattern. Attendance in 1992 topped 200,000, and peaked in 1993-1994 at over 300,000, but has been declining since that period. Attendance in 1998 was approximately 90,000 persons. The city and county are in the process of increasing their marketing efforts and anticipate that attendance will rebound. Thus, for planning purposes, an attendance of approximately 100,000 to 120,000 should be used.

Hours of operation (except Christmas and New Year's Day):

- 9:00 a.m. through 6:00 p.m. (April 1 through October 31).
- 9:00 a.m. through 4:00 p.m. (November 1 through March 31).

Some facts about visitation are:

- Fifty-seven percent of the total visitors come to the Interpretive Center during the months of July and August. A key goal of the promoters of the center is to increase winter (December through February) attendance. In the winter months attendance drops to four to five percent of the total on a monthly basis.
- The average length of stay for a visitor is three hours.
- Special events such as the Pioneer Festival are the most active times at the interpretive Center with 1,500 to 2,000 people/day visitation level.
- Approximately 50 percent of users do not pay the \$5.00 entrance fee.
- From the opening in 1992 until 1997, an entrance fee was not charged.

■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The Oregon Trail Interpretive Center is a relatively new facility, having opened in 1992. The visitor building is built atop Flagstaff Hill with a view to the Valley below. The entrance to the Interpretive Center is via a fee collection station at the base of the hill, approximately 700 to 800 feet from State Route 86. From there a one-way leads to the top of Flagstaff Hill and into parking lots for the Visitor Center. Parking for the center is divided into three different parking lots. Total parking capacity in the lots is approximately 100 vehicles. In general:

- The upper lot (which contains approximately 30 percent of the total capacity) is filled to capacity;
- The middle lot is generally half-full during peak times of the typical day; and
- The third lot is seldom used.

For special events (which have attendance in excess of the paved lot supply) additional remote parking areas have been created across State Route 86 from the main entrance. Patrons are shuttled to the building via vans. Typically, three vans are used. One is owned by the BLM and others are leased/rented or borrowed for events.

Interpretive trails wind their way down the side of the hill to wagon ruts left by historic users of the Oregon Trail and an overlook area. The building, parking lots, and most of the interpretive trail system meet ADA accessibility guidelines and are in good condition.

3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

During the typical day, transportation is not a significant issue for center operators. The most significant of the transportation concerns is the length of a left turn bay at the main entrance. The bay is thought to be relatively short based on the typical vehicle operating speeds on State Route 86. Other potential transportation issues which the center deals with are:

- Concerns over snow and ice removal during the winter months. The one-way access route is relatively steep at points. Heating during the day in the winter results in snow melt and water running along the route. The water refreezes after the sun goes down and results in morning ice.
- The access route is relatively steep and BLM staff would like to reduce the grade through rerouting.
- BLM staff would like to enhance security through installation of CCTV along the entrance route.
- The overflow lots are gravel/rock. Providing additional resources to enhance dust control would be a benefit.

3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The City and County of Baker have played an active part in the Development of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center. The City of Baker spearheaded the effort to get the Interpretive Center built, and are very proud of their accomplishment.

In addition to their development, the community of Baker City has strong interest in preserving the history of their town and realize that this impacts their visitor industry. An

example of their historical preservation is the historic Geyser Grand Hotel (see Figure 3). This hotel was saved from the wrecking ball and restored to its original grandeur.

Figure 3. The Geyser Grand Hotel



Baker City is experiencing growth in the community. There are plans for two new subdivisions in town after a decade with little residential growth.. Finally, a new \$16 million shopping center has been proposed, as well as a National Guard Armory and Conference Center. All of these projects point to growth in a town of 10,000 people.

Although there is growth, the unemployment rate in 1997 was 10.3 percent, 5.5 percent higher than the national average. This may have been due to the in-migration of people to the area and changes in management of public lands adversely affecting the regional wood products industry.

3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The Oregon Trail interpretive Center was created to preserve the cultural resource that is the Oregon Trail. A concern for the Interpretive Center is the balance of visitation with the preservation of cultural resources such as the wagon ruts left by the early pioneers. The wagon ruts along the pedestrian trail are not protected from foot traffic. Thus, with the thousands of feet that have walked over them, the wagon ruts are literally being trampled out of existence.

Other cultural issues involve the visitor experience. It is important to the Visitor Center to not only show the visitors where the Oregon Trail was, but to provide for interpretation and a chronological history of the entire Oregon Trail.

A primary concern for the BLM is reformation of the cyptobiotic crust that has been destroyed by grazing livestock. Grazing was restricted approximately nine years ago and the crust has begun to return.

Mines are located throughout the area surrounding the site. An abandoned mineshaft northeast of the parking areas has been a concern for the BLM.

As with all other units in the arid, but vegetated portions the country, fire is a primary concern. Smoking is not allowed on the site (indoors or out).

3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The Oregon Trail Interpretive Center's focus is to educate the public on the history of the Oregon Trail. The majority of visitors use the center for that purpose. Other recreation uses for the Center are interpretive plays, special events such as Pioneer Days, and hiking the interpretive trails.

■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination

4.1 BLM Plans

The Visitor Center concept is not finished. It is anticipated that it will require an additional two years of work to complete the center as proposed in the December 1988 Environmental Assessment. The most significant element still to complete are exhibits.

4.2 Public and Agency Coordination

A Federal Advisory committee oversees the interactions with the City of Baker City and the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center. The seven member committee, called the National

Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center Committee, focuses on marketing the Interpretive Center to the public and upgrades for the Interpretive Center.

■ 5.0 Assessment of Need and System Options

5.1 Magnitude of Need

The level of need for the site is moderate. Visitation is relatively low and traffic is not generally a concern. During peak periods, however, there are safety concerns at the entrance drive with State Route 86.

5.2 Range of Feasible Transit Alternatives

Potential alternatives to consider include:

- TSM improvements to lengthen the entrance drive left turn bay on the west approach. In addition, adding a right turn lane to the east approach would likely enhance traffic safety in the area.
- Bike lanes from Baker City (five miles) would provide increased access to the site and open it up to another sector of the population. The route is regularly used for large bike tours and auto tour events. State Route 86 in this area was included in the National Bike Centennial Route (1976) and has been a popular bike route ever since. No dedicated lanes exist. State Route 86 is designated as a State Scenic Route, a National Scenic Byway and a BLM Backcountry Bike Route.

Other than during peak event weekends (which occur one to two weekends per season) transit is not likely a feasible alternative.

■ 6.0 Bibliography

Visitor data provided by BLM staff.

National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center at Flagstaff Hill, Management Plan, 1998.

Proposed National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center at Flagstaff Hill Decision Record and Environmental Assessment, December 1988.

■ 7.0 Persons Interviewed

David Hunsaker, Center Director, BLM on September 20, 1999

Boyd Perry, BLM on September 16, 1999

Brian Cole (Baker County Commission), Karen Yeakley (Baker City Mayor) and Gordon Zimmerman (Baker City Manager) on September 16, 1999